We begin Lent with Ash Wednesday. We embark on the Lenten journey both by hearing scriptures that speak about fasting and ashes and (for many of us) by receiving ashes. Ashes in scripture signify death, mourning, and penitence. And they signify communal penitence as well as personal penitence. In the church, at least since the 9th century, public penitents were marked with ashes. The ashes, eventually used by all the faithful, came from the palms of the preceding year’s Palm Sunday procession. Our use of ashes is a tradition from scripture and from this old public act of penitence.

The sign of ashes helps us know that Lent is not as much a 40-day reflection on the passion of Christ as it is a school of repentance for us. Of course Lent is our remembrance of what Christ has done for the life of the world. But our Lenten journey is about our passage to new life in Christ: passage, or journeying, that involves repentance. The readings this day are the stuff of our repentance: we store up false treasures; we show off our piety; we do not live rightly in community; we do harm to the least of these in the world; we do not live publicly as the righteousness of God.

Eastern Christians say that the tone of Great Lent is one of Bright Sadness. For all the ways we forsake God and every aspect of God's creation, we are remorseful and sad. But life is not a meaningless journey to a meaningless end. We travel toward the fullness of the reign of God and God’s righteousness. All that we continuously lose and betray is what we were given at baptism: Christ is our new life, now is the day of salvation.

Let us keep the fast so that we may keep the Feast!

Almighty and ever-living God, you hate nothing you have made, and you forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create in us new and honest hearts, so that, truly repenting of our sins, we may receive from you, the God of all mercy, full pardon and forgiveness through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Of what do I repent? How will I keep the Fast?
I have always thought that Eve was treated unfairly in interpretations of Genesis. She is normally remembered as the woman who caused the expulsion of the first human beings from Eden, and later by New Testament writers as the culprit behind “the Fall.”

Yet if you read the text in Genesis carefully there are hints that Eve was the real victim. The Bible never states, for example, that God told her directly to stay away from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Rather, it seems that she heard this decree from Adam. Considering that she garbles the command when she repeats it back to the serpent (“nor shall you touch it...” [Gen 3:2]), there are reasons to doubt Adam’s transmission. Indeed, the serpent is the first person to talk to Eve directly. God and Adam talk about her, but never to her. Having been ignored, is it any wonder that she engaged with the serpent so willingly?

Where is Adam during the exchange between Eve and the serpent. Surely, if Eve was created to be Adam’s helpmate, this help and support was not meant to be one-sided. Actually the text does tell us where Adam was during Eve’s conversation. Genesis 3:6 states that “he was with her” (emphasis added). He was there with Eve while she was talking to the serpent! Why doesn’t he say anything? Why doesn’t he stop her—tell her to stay away from the tree as the fruit was deadly? Adam, more than anyone, knew the risks as he had heard it directly from God. And yet he said nothing while Eve takes the fruit; and when she did not die, only then did he take a bite. Eve is his guinea pig, and conveniently a source of blame when their actions are discovered by God.

In this Lenten season, we are reminded of the times that we have acted like Adam. Times when we have failed to protect the lonely, the disregarded, the vulnerable, leaving them open as targets. Times when we have failed to stand up for them, to engage the various serpents on their behalf. We are also reminded of our innate ability to place blame on others—our failure to take full responsibility for our wrongdoings. The desire to say, “It is not my fault, but your fault.” This story reminds us that such failures, at times, can have long-lasting consequences. So let us take responsibility for our own faults, looking inward and not outward, and taking responsibility for our own misdeeds. And in so doing, let us receive forgiveness for our sins.

Gracious God, open our eyes so we may see the ways in which we have blamed others for our problems, refused responsibility for our own shortcomings, and failed to stand up for the vulnerable and weak among us. Let us, as the psalmist states, confess our transgressions to the Lord so that we may be blessed with your forgiveness. Amen.

PERSONAL REFLECTION
This week, note the times when you feel as vulnerable as Eve did when she had to wrestle verbally with the serpent alone. How did you feel during such a time? And what would have been helpful to you at such a point? Note also who or what helped you during your time of vulnerability. What did they do for you, and how did that relieve your feelings of loneliness? Finally, pray for ways in which you can act as support or help for others in their times of weakness.
March 12, 2017 | Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 12:1-4a | Psalm 121
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 | John 3:1-17 or Matthew 17:1-9

David F. White
The C. Ellis and Nancy Gribble Nelson Professor of Christian Education and Professor of Methodist Studies

It is not hard to muster sympathy for the sons of Zebedee whom Jesus called forth from their fishing boats to be his disciples, to help usher in God’s reign. Fishing, after all, is immanently satisfying. Put a worm on a hook or throw a net into the shallows and you have dinner for the night. But now, in a twist of fate, these fishermen find themselves following a carpenter’s son from town to dusty town, preaching, teaching, and malingering with the outcasts of Judea. There was no Kingdom, no army, no treasury, no identifiable citizenry. Just blisters, sore feet, and gnawing hunger. At the end of the day as they lay down to sleep, they surely must have longed for their nets; simpler lives in which a day’s work yielded visible rewards. It is no wonder that when these same disciples accompanied Jesus up a mountain and his face began to shine and they heard a voice from heaven, they, in their appetite for something tangible, asked to build tents and remain there.

We are no different today. We flock to churches with big steeples, spectacular music, charismatic preachers, and large crowds. We exult when our political party is in power. We want to remain in the world of rich reward, of immediate and tangible good. We are impatient when our faith does not yield results, immediate and concrete enough to be counted—as bodies, dollars, square footage, or senate seats. We are more comfortable with the things we can readily control, or that can be manipulated by an act of will or ego. We are not very good at living in mere hope.

For Christians, our faith is nurtured by memory and hope. We recall the patriarch Abraham who is deemed a knight of faith—an adventurer who could not see or touch the nation that God promised to him, but who responded by faith in love and obedience to God. Neither is our true home founded in those things we produce daily—whether fish, dollars, or other spectacles of success. Our home is in the One whose life was dashed on the rocks of imperial power but in whose resurrection we are promised new life, for now and eternity. In the waters of baptism we find our hope and our home. The season of Lent constitutes a protracted lesson in loosening our grip on those things which we grasp, and to see how they, in their goodness, point to the One who is to come in fullness, Jesus Christ.

Gracious God, father of Abraham, Andrew, James and John, and all those who journey forth in faith, we pause to take notice of those things we grip so tightly as to restrict our love of God and neighbor. We are grateful for the fruits of our work and our will, but teach us, we ask, not to see them as reflections of our worth; but instead, in their goodness, as windows to your gracious fullness. In this season, may we glimpse your glory in ordinary things around us—in our friends, family, work, home, and nation. But more importantly teach us to resist the idolatry of resting too contently in any of these. Remind us instead of our baptism, the waters in which all things are transformed as they flow finally into you. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, our memory and our hope. Amen.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

What are the things that you grip so tightly that they restrict your love of God and neighbor? What are the things in your life that point toward a future hope fulfilled in Jesus’s reign? What things are you most commonly tempted to embrace as an idol?
After the tenth plague Moses and the Israelites crossed the Red Sea into the desert. Along the way the people became thirsty and began to cry out to Moses saying, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”

The Christian walk is not an easy one. Sometimes people have the false impression that becoming a Christian will solve all their problems. Actually, it is the other way around. Sometimes it seems easier to stay in Egypt where there is food and water. It is familiar. But God calls us to be liberated from bondage and struggle for the promised land. Yes, it is unfamiliar and we don’t know what lies ahead, but God accompanies us along the way.

A few years ago I had the privilege of going on a six-day tour of the Sinai Desert. It wasn’t exactly a leisure trip. We went on an old green truck with no sides. The sleeping quarters were a straw mat in the open desert. We cooked our own meals and did our own dishes on a rotating schedule. The bathroom facilities consisted of ... well, you get the picture. One of the stops on the tour was Mount Horeb where Moses is believed to have tapped the rock. The whole time I was in the desert I couldn’t get over the vastness of the place. One afternoon our guide parked the truck in the middle of a valley and invited us to get out and explore. She gave us three hours to just wander. I climbed up a nearby mountain and looked down on the truck in the middle of the valley. It looked like a matchbox car—so small and insignificant in the vast open desert. I felt even smaller. Up on that mountain I found a tiny little flower. How a flower could survive in an arid and rugged desert I don’t know. But I took it as a sign from God than in the midst of our walk, even when we feel alone, God is there with us giving us hope and encouragement to not give up. Even when it seems tempting to remain comfortable, God calls us toward the liberation of the promised land—and is with us along the way providing water (or a flower).

Dear God, in the midst of the wilderness and the struggles thank you for the little signs of your presence among us. Amen.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Describe a time when you wandered or felt lost—literally or figuratively. Were you alone or in a group? What about it was unfamiliar? Did you feel God was accompanying you and if so, at what point did you feel that way? To what land of liberation is God calling you at this time?
lectionaries are so excessive, verses tumbling over verses, tentacles stretching over large spans of the Good Book to pluck a passage here, a passage there. What if the mysterious Assemblers of Lections had a bad day?

Reading through the passages assigned for today, we see themes: blindness/darkness and light, the nonsense of God that exposes our own nonsense, the Lord's protection of Samuel, the sheep, and the blind man, and more.

Today I am captured by a single phrase from John: so that God's works might be revealed in him. Forget the blindness for the moment. Ponder this: Were you born so that God's works might be revealed in you? How's that going?

It is the purpose of your birth to reveal God's works. That is why you were born. And it is the purpose of your birth that God's works be revealed. You have a special portion of God's works to be revealed, that will not be revealed unless you do it. It is your charism. But it will be revealed in you. Not by you, so you are not actually doing it. You participate in this revelation of God's works, but it is not you who is doing the revealing ... “the LORD does not see as mortals see.” One must always be suspicious of any claims to know “what God is doing here.” God may be doing something quite different. As we often say, God's ways are mysterious. “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” We need to be careful of our claims. Our baptism into the womb and wisdom of the church gives us tools for recognition, discernment but not certainty. We know more, but not all.

God’s works are revealed, so there is something that is evidently of God that we will perceive. "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” There is a known change from unseeing to seeing. For what purpose does he now see? Is the revelation simply that his sight is given, or that a new purpose is given? So our purpose is to live knowing that God’s works are being revealed, even if we are not clear what they are, to live purposefully. Mary Oliver writes, “My work is loving the world.” God does the rest.

O Holy Revealer, nourish in me a wonder that I may know that your working is constant around me and in me. I do not know what you are doing, only that you are always at work, never sleeping. You have welcomed me into your church through my baptism. Now send me, dripping with water, into a world in so much want of my tottering love.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

The world comes so quickly at us, waves pushing and undertow pulling. Mary Oliver again, “I am so distant from the hope of myself, in which I have a goodness, and discernment, and never hurry through the world but walk slowly, and bow often.” The hope of myself. So how does one not just hope, but be hope? Love the world. Walk slowly and love the world. There is no love without hope, and no hope without love. Bow often. This week reflect on this: How do I find the hope of myself? How do I retain it? What makes me lose it?
This week's texts feature the resurrection stories of Lazarus in John and the Valley of Dry Bones in Ezekiel. In both stories, there is a verse that captures the sheer incredulity of resurrection. In Ezekiel, God asks rhetorically, “Can these bones live?” and in John, Martha's incredulity sounds almost comical: “Already there is a stench!” How could anyone believe in the audacity of resurrection? We know that dead is dead. That is the end of the story.

But both of these texts tell a different story, in which death does not have the final word. By the power of God, Ezekiel prophesies to the dry bones and they come alive. Jesus raises Lazarus in order to bring glory to God, and so Lazarus comes out of the tomb and breathes life once more.

On this Lenten journey toward the cross and resurrection, we know the end of the story. We know that Jesus is “the resurrection and the life,” the one who promises that “those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” And Jesus follows this with a question: “Do you believe this?”

His question is posed not only to Martha, but to us. Do we believe this?

I tend to feel like Martha, ready to answer quickly, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah…” but in that half-hearted way that I imagine to be in Martha’s reply, when what she really feels is, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!”

How do we face death when we’ve experienced the death of a friend or family member or even contemplated our own? In the face of deep sorrow and grief, resurrection seems incredible, not believable.

But what if we faced death as baptism? Imagining a baptism by immersion, we can picture a person being taken into the water, brought below its surface. Like death, dropping below into water in which humans cannot breathe, cutting the person off from all of those still breathing on the land. This image of submerging into water shares similarities with the image of a person dying.

As Christians, we say we are baptized into Christ’s death. In Christ, we are also raised to new life. Like dry bones, like Lazarus, like Christ himself, we, too, shall rise. So shall all those who have died. They are merely below the surface, but soon they too will emerge, fresh and clean, coming out of the waters that have held them, bathed in the love of Christ.

In life and in death, we belong to you, O God. We pray that as we journey towards Easter, that you would breathe into our dry bones, call us out of tombs, and help us live into our identity as baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection, Amen.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Are there moments in your life when you have been faced with a valley of dry bones or have mourned the loss of a loved one? During those moments, what did resurrection mean to you? It can be especially hard to take comfort in resurrection when death seems to have swallowed up what we held most dear. Take time this week to consider the ways that in the midst of death, when resurrection still feels far away, how Christ’s relationship with us and care for us keeps alive in us the promise of resurrection. Where have you seen that promise at work in your own life, or in the lives of others? Blessings to you this week as you continue to journey toward Easter.
Matthew’s account of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem always hangs me up on two details.

The first is Jesus instructing his disciples to go into the city and find “a donkey tied, and a colt with her.” Matthew explains the need of the two animals by quoting Zechariah 9:9, where the prophet imagines the Messiah coming to Jerusalem as a king:

triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Anyone who reads Hebrew (as Matthew certainly did) knows that the second and third lines are poetic parallels, expressions in different language of a single reality. Why, then, does Matthew insist that the disciples bring two animals, a donkey and a colt?

The answer lies in Matthew’s overriding urge to reveal Jesus as the messianic king, the one whose coming brings in the new creation that will overturn all the injustice, hopelessness, and desperation of his people. Matthew spares no detail to make the connection—even to the point of creating a nonsensical picture of Jesus riding two animals at once. Don’t see the image, he seems to say; see the eschatological truth behind it. This is no Sunday parade. This is the beginning of the end, and the end of the beginning.

The other detail is the crowd lining the street, shouting, “Hosanna!” Hosanna is actually a Hebrew imperative that means “Save us!” In the ancient world, inhabitants of the city lined the road out from the city gate anticipating the return of their king from the battle that would determine their fate. As the king appeared in the distance, the people shouted “Hosanna! Save us!” By the first century, scholars think, the cry had lost its existential angst and become a shout of acclamation—in the same way “'bye” has descended from a prayer (“'bye” from “good-bye” from “God be with ye”) into meaningless pleasantry. But surely Matthew must have known—even if the crowd doesn’t—that those who raise the cry very much need saving; indeed, they need the very salvation this eschatological messiah brings.

There is, it seems to me, a subversive quality about Palm Sunday. It has a sneaky way of inviting us to see not the same old thing but God’s new creation dawning around us, tucked into the tiniest details of our lives, even silly, ridiculous ones. And before he is done, Matthew has us crying out for the salvation that new creation alone can bring, even if we are clueless about how much we need it.

O You, who are forever bringing in the new creation, so save and transform our imaginations that we can see nothing so clearly as its coming and how much we yearn for its arrival.
It Is No Small Thing
by Paul Hooker

It is no small thing to say
god bless this our land. 
Blessing might well be 
curse when pronounced 
by the wrong god.

It is no small thing to name 
the child, god-with-us. 
Like a gladius 
it cuts both ways 
when rightly swung.

It is no small thing to cry 
Hosanna, when we 
can so rarely think 
of things from which 
we need saving.

It is no small thing to claim 
he is risen when 
anyone can see 
the stone-sealed tomb 
is undisturbed.

PERSONAL REFLECTION
In what ways is Palm Sunday “subversive” for you? How does the new creation that God is creating emerge in the “small things” of your life? How do those “small things” become more than they first appear as you live with and try to understand them?
Maundy Thursday is a fulcrum, a pivot point. It is a moment when everything turns.

It is a pivot point in the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus’s active ministry, which began with his baptism, concludes at the Last Supper. During that ministry, Jesus was active. He taught. He observed. He healed. He condemned. He was always the one in control. He was in charge. He was, to use the phrase of Karl Barth, “the Royal Man.”

But all that changed after the Last Supper. For the next three days, Jesus was acted upon. He suffered—not only in the sense of experiencing pain, which he undoubtedly did, but also in the sense that he allowed other people to do to him all that they had decided to do. He was still in charge. That was clear. He could have stopped everything. He could have summoned the angel army. But Jesus’s mission at this point was to obey, to endure, to allow. To suffer. For the real enemy was not the Temple guards or the Roman soldiers or the frenzied mob. The real enemy was sin itself, and sin could not be overcome by the weapons of sin. Violence and slaughter magnified sin, rather than defeating it. Sin could only be overcome by obedience, forgiveness, and atonement. So Jesus was mocked and tortured and killed, and he allowed all of it. The turn from actively preaching, teaching, and healing to surrendering, enduring, and suffering was the fulcrum of Maundy Thursday.

There was a turn for the disciples as well, but it was a turn in the opposite direction. It was the turn from passivity to activity. During Jesus’s ministry, they had watched and listened and, as often as not, scratched their heads. Sometimes they had triumphed, as when Jesus sent seventy of them out to spread the news. Often they failed. They were praised and they were rebuked. But at the Last Supper they were commanded: “Do this—to remember me.” “I have set you an example.” “I am giving you a new commandment.” They did not do very well at first. They ran away from the cross. But, as the book of Acts recounts, they gained courage and energy and wisdom. Guided by their memories of Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit, they became active. The Gospel was spread; the church went out; the faith advanced.

The movement from passive to active is repeated in the sacramental life of every Christian. The recipients of baptism are passive. People do not baptize themselves. Their lives as Christians begin when another gets them wet. Then comes Holy Communion. There is certainly an element of passivity in communion—we receive from another. But we also serve each other. The simple act of receiving the elements and passing them on symbolizes the entire Christian life. We distribute what we have been given. Nothing stops with us. Thus we love one another and obey our Lord.

O Lord, on this day, strengthen our communion—our being together—with you and with each other. Let us give thanks to you for doing that which we cannot do for ourselves, and suffering all that leads to our redemption. And help us to make our thanksgiving concrete, as we are active in our service to others. Make us willing to do what we can and grateful that what we cannot do has in fact been done. In Jesus’s holy name, Amen.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: Consider your life in terms of what you have been given and what you can give. Chart your movement from passivity to activity—from baptism to communion. Reflect on how this movement has shaped your personal discipleship.
April 14, 2017 |

GOOD FRIDAY
Isaiah 52:13-53:12 | Psalm 22

Margaret Aymer
Associate Professor of New Testament

Tetelestai. “It has been completed.” Thus Jesus’ life ends. He commends his mother and disciple to one another. He thirsts. And then, he says: “It has been completed.” In John’s gospel, Jesus is almost silent from the cross. Gone are the cry of agony and the insults. No Temple curtain rips; no centurion testifies. The sun keeps shining; it is not even Passover yet. Instead John testifies: “It has been completed.” Simple. Quiet. Apocalyptic.

This is John’s response to Psalm 22’s cry, “Why have you forsaken me?” No, says John, God has not forsaken. This Roman lynching tree on which the Word made flesh-and-blood dies by imperial execution and religious collusion is, in fact, a birthing chamber. As blood and water flow, those drawn to this crucified Lord receive the power to become children of God. This is what John testified to us from the beginning. “All who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” Through Christ we gain the kind of access to God that a child ought to have to the mother who gave him birth.

This is our call. The call is ontological; it has to do with who we are. Through the cross, we have sisters and brothers of Christ, birth children of Almighty God, born anew in Jesus’ one final declaration. Moreover, the lifting up of Christ signifies the gathering together of God’s fractious children, all who believe. We are drawn together to Christ lifted up. We are knit together as family: behold your kin. And as children of God newly born around this cross, we hear again Christ’s words. “Love one another as I have loved you.” We respond in obedience to the same love with which “God so loved the world.” We hear the call to strip off our privilege and wash dirty feet. Bound by love, we are called to lay down our lives for others.

But don’t hurry away to get busy. Today is not about your work. Today, at this cross, we remember the completion of Jesus’ work. For on this day, the birthing has been completed. On this day, the promise has been fulfilled. On this day, the living water is poured out for all of human kind. On this day, at this cross, we have been born again.

Stay here, then. Do not turn from the violence of the empire; we, too, are a violent people. Do not turn from the destruction of the earth, as wood and thorn are used to kill and maim; we too misuse creation. Do not turn from what envy has done; we too wound and kill out of envy. Stay here, in the uncomfortable silence as Jesus’ last word and final breath changes everything. Stay here, as the womb contracts around us and we are reborn. For this day, Jesus declares basta! This day, on this far too silent cross, everything changes forever. “It has been completed.”

Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small; love so amazing, so divine demands my soul, my life, my all.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: Sit in a comfortable position, and meditate on the words “It is finished” for one minute. If today, through the cross, we have been born again, what thoughts or feelings might we release into the hand of our loving and sacrificial God? If today we have been born again, what might this mean for how we live in this world that God so loves?
Jesus died. Friday evening, after Jesus’s crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea asked the Roman ruler Pilate for Jesus’ body. When he received this body, Joseph prepared it for burial and placed Jesus in Joseph’s own tomb: one last tender act of care that contrasts with Jesus’ humiliating, brutal murder. After burial, Jesus’s body lay in this tomb that night and all of the next day, evening, and night.

We might imagine the disciples’ devastation on this Saturday: the first day when their teacher is no longer in the world. The gospels tell us that Jesus proclaimed that the Son of Man would suffer, die, and be raised again, but it is likely that many—if not all—who heard this proclamation did not believe it. Death, after all, is final. This Saturday was surely a day of grief, bitterness, and questioning. Why was Jesus forsaken like this? How could this community live without its teacher? How could they go on in the wake of his death?

The Book of Job makes a contrast between a tree that, when cut down, will eventually sprout again and human death. When we die, we “do not rise again; until the heavens are no more, [we] will not awake” (14:12). All of us who have lost a loved one can attest to the absence, the gaping hole that arises in the wake of death, a gap and an emptiness that no one can fill.

Perhaps this is why our society expends so much energy and resources in avoiding death, or pretending that death does not exist. We can surround ourselves with creature comforts or pretend like we are invulnerable by focusing on our legacies. We can try to ward off death through exercise regimens, diet, and even the bizarre promise of cryogenics. This behavior also extends to nations that protect their own interests at all costs, trying to secure their invincibility through might, money, or other means.

But the Good News of Holy Saturday presents an alternative. As the late Austin Seminary professor of theology Alan Lewis writes, “The enigmatic logic of Easter Saturday ... is that though self-preservation is massively destructive, self-expenditure is even more fulsomely creative.” Self-preservation is ultimately destructive because it will tolerate anything (even destroying others) in the name of saving oneself. Jesus shows us another way. In dying, he paves the way for more abundant life for all creation. Holy Saturday teaches us that we all die, that Jesus participates in our own deaths, and that we become agents of life not by clinging to it at all costs, but by loving life, embracing our finitude, and mourning when others die. Grief, after all, is a testament to our capacity to love. Even in death we take part in the miracle of new life that emerges on the day after Jesus’s body lay in the tomb. And in the meantime, we grieve.

Gracious God, teach us to cherish life and hold our lives gently, using our lives so that others, too, might live. Amen.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: Write about the absence and emptiness you have felt after the death of a loved one. How did you grieve for that person? Do you still grieve for that person, and, if so, how has that grief changed over time? To what do you attribute that change?
A while back, I had a phone conversation with a pastor of a large Presbyterian church situated on an urban avenue in a major city. There’s a bell-tower astride the gothic, cathedral-style building, and the bells chime each quarter-hour. At noon, the organist plays hymn tunes on them, and it was during that noonday concert that I called my friend. Since it was a warm day and his study was near the bell-tower, he had his windows open as we talked.

I said, “What a treat it must be to hear that carillon played on a regular basis.”

“What was that?” my friend replied.

I repeated, “What a treat it must be to hear that carillon on a regular basis.”

“Excuse me,” he said, “I’m going to have to close the window here; I can’t hear you because of these damned bells!”

This story suggests a parable. Some of us step into this Easter Day filled with expectancy: aware today of the heavenly music that undergirds all of life and pulls us in hope toward a different sort of future that comes to overturn and redeem the present. This day fairly peals out the tune by which that future will be played—a future that is real, even if not yet fully realized.

Others of us step into this day with less certainty than that, more likely to be distracted by such heavenly music. Life, perhaps, is little more than the clanging of “damned bells”—the steady marching on of time by which tomorrow is bound to serve up nothing more unique or exciting than a warmed-up version of yesterday.

But Easter proclaims another story. The message of Easter is that God alone is able to complete what we cannot complete—not even with a hammer and some nails and a cross.

The truth is that we often find each of these stories compelling—the one that the women experienced at the cemetery when the angel validated all of their hopes and told them that Jesus would meet them again in their future; and the false narrative begun by the chief priests who tried to sow doubt.

When the disciples saw Jesus, “they worshipped him but some doubted” (another rendering of the Greek is that “they worshipped him and they doubted”). Congregations at Easter are thus filled with worshippers and doubters, and many of us are mixtures of both. The Gospel makes room for both our worship and our doubts.

At Rockefeller Center in New York, there is a statue of Atlas holding up the world. It is a symbol of our culture’s own premature self-confidence and self-sufficiency. Atlas—the master of the world, the one who holds all of it on his shoulders—is what, unchecked, we would all like to be. But directly across Fifth Avenue, another symbol offers a rebuttal to Atlas. It’s the high altar of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, from which, over and over again, Christians celebrate joyfully that “On the third day He rose again from the dead.”

There they are again—those two stories, facing each other. The master of it all, and the One Who sacrificed Himself for all. Each symbol has its appeal. But the question for us at Easter is, which symbol are we leaning toward? Which story holds the hope of the world?
Brightness of God’s glory and exact image of God’s person,
whom death could not conquer nor the tomb imprison,
as you have shared our frailty in human flesh,
help us to share your immortality in the Spirit.
Let no shadow of the grave terrify us,
and no fear of darkness turn our hearts from you.
Reveal yourself to us this day and all our days,
as the first and the last, the Living One, our immortal Savior and Lord, Amen.